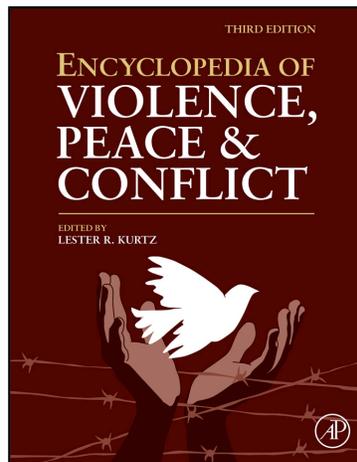


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Class Conflict in Capitalist Society

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Social Bases of Class Conflict	118
Class as Hierarchical Position	118
Class as Antagonistic Relational Process	119
Intraclass Conflict and Class Formation	120
Concrete Dimensions of Class Conflict	121
Major Historical Phases of Capitalist Imposition	121
Primitive Accumulation and Early Extensive Regimes	121
Working Day, Time Discipline, and Intensive Regimes	122
The State, Distributional Struggles, and Productivity Deals	122
Globalization and the Contemporary Capitalist Offensive	122
Levels, Arenas, and Forms of Labor Struggle	123
Everyday Resistance	123
Politicized Movements and Organizations	123
Revolutionary Action	124
Comparative Trends in Class Conflict	124
Class Conflict in the United States and Other Core Capitalist Nations	125
Electoral Politics: The Nonviolent Democratic Class Struggle	125
Unions: Comparative Trends	126
Strikes: Comparative Trends	126
Strikes: US Patterns	128
Non-core Patterns of Unrest in the Twenty-First Century	130
Class Conflicts in the 21st Century	133
References	135

Class conflict refers to a broad set of social actions that are manifested in direct and indirect, violent and nonviolent, institutionalized and noninstitutionalized struggles between social classes. At root, classes are defined by social relations that bind people into the social organization of labor, production, circulation, and distribution processes. These relations simultaneously involve objective and subjective dimensions and appear in economic, political, and ideological forms. In capitalist societies, the employer–employee (or wage) relationship is central. Hence, we speak of labor-management conflict as a basic dimension of contemporary class conflict.

Class analysis has a long, rich, and contentious history that spans the development of capitalism, social science in general, and sociology in particular. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, important class analytic studies of modern capitalist society were advanced in the impressive works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Rosa Luxemburg, Georg Lukacs, and Antonio Gramsci, to name a few. Taking their lead from these early theorists/activists, contemporary class analysts believe that class conflict is significant because it: (1) is grounded in the exploitation of human labor, (2) permeates and shapes virtually all social values and institutions, and (3) is an important force in the dynamic trajectory of capitalism as a whole.

We begin with a discussion of the structured but indeterminate social bases of class conflict, progress into an inventory of concrete dimensions of class conflict, and then examine comparative national trends in forms of class conflict across different institutional arenas in recent decades. We conclude with brief speculative comments about possible directions of class conflict in the 21st century.

Social Bases of Class Conflict

Class conflict – its causes, consequences, significance – are all rooted in how we understand social class. Two basic approaches have dominated class analytic scholarship: (1) class as hierarchical position, and (2) class as antagonistic social relational process.

Class as Hierarchical Position

Much of modern social science has conceptualized class as structured space, a position, within an overall hierarchical ranking. Following the ideas of Max Weber (1978), classes are traditionally conceived as gradational hierarchies and measured in quantities of social status, income, or wealth. In the neo-Marxist stratification approach of Erik Wright (1985), classes have also been

conceptualized as differentiated positions to be filled. Class structure is rooted in certain occupational types that, based on their job characteristics, define the class to which a person belongs.

While both traditional and neo-Marxist stratification approaches have their own merits – offering a picture of resource distribution or yielding a static map of aggregated occupational characteristics – neither is particularly useful for understanding the dynamics of class conflict and related social change. How, then, might we understand the conflictual dynamics of social class?

Class as Antagonistic Relational Process

Social class is at the core of any class-based society. In a particular historical era, a subordinate class (e.g., serfs, slaves, workers) – so defined by the social conditions that differentially separate them from the control of their life, wealth, and labor – is compelled to produce at a rate beyond that necessary for its own survival or reproduction. This social surplus (value) is the source of new wealth and is expropriated by a corresponding dominant class (e.g., lords, slave-owners, capitalists), whose ownership of productive property allows them to live off the labor of those beneath them. The relationship between rulers and ruled – the basic antagonistic classes of any society – is shaped by the manner in which this surplus is extracted from the direct producers. Thus, class refers to a power relation and class conflict is about the determination of power to shape social life in particular directions.

Capitalism is so named because capital is the foundation, the core, of this mode of social life. But what, then, do we mean by “capital”? In the most impressive answer to this question, [Karl Marx \(1967\)](#) filled three lengthy volumes, entitled *Capital*. We draw on those ideas briefly and begin with this premise: “capital” is a form of social power relation that involves the subordination and exploitation of human labor through the social organization of the commodity-form, is continuously expanding, and is personified in the capitalist and worker.

But why is this social relation necessarily antagonistic or conflictual? The fundamental unit of capital is the commodity. The social relations that comprise the commodity (i.e., simultaneously use-value and exchange-value organized to acquire surplus-value) and capital in its expanded form, undergird, envelop, and shape all spheres of social life. Hence, “things of value” that appear as self-contained objective entities are really given their “value” by the social relations among people. Market processes, for example, are not driven by mysterious “laws”, but are rather dynamic and volatile social relations.

Capitalism’s ever-expansive and cumulative quality has a tendency to turn virtually everything into the form of a commodity in a relentless drive to expand surplus-value. Surplus-value, in turn, becomes the social basis for the monetary accounting category called “profit.” Commodity relations that comprise capital come to commodify people in a host of different ways. However, this happens most fundamentally through the wage relation, through the buying and selling of human labor-power (potential) for definite periods of time (e.g., working hour, working day, work week). But this process of commodifying human beings in which employers convert labor-power into capital by treating it as an object (e.g., “factor of production”) like any other commodity leads, over time, to varying forms of resistance.

All commodity relations are two-sided, simultaneously constituted by use-value and exchange-value. When people are commodified (proletarianized) through the wage relation, exchange-value appears as the buying of the worker’s labor-power for a money wage. This sort of exchange on the labor market appears as freely chosen by both employer and employee in which (under the best of circumstances) the rules of equality, ownership, and individualism prevail. But labor-power (potential) that the employer purchased is not what is actually desired by the employer. Once purchased, the labor-power is assembled (classically) in what Marx colorfully termed the “hidden abode of production”. Here in the workplace all pretense to equality ceases as capitalist management settles down to extract maximum labor from labor-power, the purchased commodity. It is this actual labor (productivity) that is the use-value of the human commodity purchased (actually rented for a period of time) by the capitalist.

However, unlike inanimate commodities utilized for their maximum contribution to expanded value (profit), labor-power is embodied in human beings with subjectivity; that is, workers have culturally established senses of justice, time, value, life, and they often protest and resist in various ways if they are treated as objects, driven too long, too hard, or too fast. On the one hand, the capitalist is under pressure to exploit labor-power to its fullest due to market pressures. On the other hand, workers attempt to protect/conservate their labor-power, the only thing of value they have, by attempting to resist the wholesale consumption of it. Each attempts to get the most for her/his commodity: For labor it is the wage and conditions of the labor process (e.g., autonomy, safe working conditions) while the capitalist focuses on maximum use-value in the form of actual labor expended (i.e., productivity).

Table 1 displays this antagonistic foundation of the basic cell of capital, the commodity-form as wage relation. The relationship embodies a dual basis for conflict: differential interest between the employer and employee over the market-based money wage and differential interest between employer and employee over the actual labor expended in the workplace. This twofold class-based conflict is also known as the “effort-reward struggle”. Outcomes – wage levels and labor as well as the ratio of the two – are indeterminate at any given point in time. The conflict is inherent in the class relation that ties labor and capitalist together and is predicated on the drive for more surplus-value (profit) through the exploitation of human labor. This is a struggle that pits “right against right”, in which the relative balance of power decides the answer to a host of socially significant questions, including: what is a fair wage? What is a fair day’s work? What is the normal length of the working day/week/year/lifetime? What are safe working conditions? How much environmental degradation is acceptable?

Table 1 Work in the wage relation as commodity-form: The basis of the “effort–reward struggle”

		<i>Commodity-form</i>	
		<i>Exchange-value</i>	<i>Use-value</i>
For capitalist:	(A)	Labor market relations Buys labor-power for a definite period of time via monetary wage (wage for potential)	Labor process relations (C) Attempts to consume/extract as much labor as possible from worker per period (working day) – actual output or productivity
	(B)	Sells labor-power for a definite period of time in return for money wage	(D) Gives up labor, but also attempts to preserve/protect labor as life-energy and major value resource being consumed

Note: Cells A and B define the terms of the money exchange (wage contract) between employer and employee in the labor market. There is a definite material basis for conflict here: for the employer, the money wage is an expense or cost of production and is therefore to be subjected to downward pressure; for the employee, the wage rate is revenue and therefore subject to upward pressure. Hence, the basis of conflict over the terms of the money wage.

Cells C and D define activity within the labor process housed within the “hidden abode” (private workplace). For the employer, actual labor (productivity) is a source of value/revenue and therefore always subject to more by management; for the employee, this labor is a liability, a drain, a means to an end, and therefore needs to be limited to preserve one’s life energy as the major resource.

Hence, capitalism is a social system based on the imposition of work through the commodity-form. Class struggle (whether overt or latent conflict) is in, through, and about the way the commodity-form is imposed on the majority of the population by forcing them to sell portions of their lives as labor-power in order to gain access to the means of life that have themselves been commodified. Capital’s engulfing tendency creates a social condition of (abstract, indirect, impersonal) coercion through markets, commodities, money, that is, through capitalistic control over the means of producing social wealth. This generalized imposition of the commodity-form through capitalist history has created class dependency and forced work as the principle means of organizing and directing society.

The opposition between capitalists and workers is significant not only because the many are exploited for the enrichment of the few, but also because these exploitation relations (and endemic conflict) are key elements in the dynamic development of capitalist social formations as a whole. Capital’s incessant drive to accumulate – to expand and mold more human life activity into the commodity-form – produces a conflictual reaction that, in turn, forces capitalists to innovate, often in conjunction with State actors and/or with consequences for State labor policy. Consequently, the dialectical relation between class conflict and systematic restructuring creates a constantly shifting “contested terrain” on which future class conflicts will unfold. This shifting terrain produces a recomposition of class combatants (i.e., what the working class looks like changes) and spawns new forms, sites, targets, and demands for subsequent struggles.

Intraclass Conflict and Class Formation

Each conflict between classes is also simultaneously a struggle within classes. Intraclass conflict happens because classes do not appear on the scene readymade – collectively organized with immediately clear interests. Questions of interests, solidarity, community, goals, strategy, tactics, are always sources of contention within classes and the immediate agents of class self-organization (or formation) are particular leaders, parties, and factions. In fact, a central part of this intraclass struggle is about the very meaning of class (Griffin and Isaac, 2001) and even whether combatants are involved in a class conflict, some nonclass form of struggle, or perhaps a combination of class and nonclass-based struggle.

Capital, too, goes through processes of class formation, although it also works diligently to deny its class character. For example, the lines of potential division within capital can issue from a number of important dimensions such as corporate size, type of capital (finance, commercial, industrial), market orientation (consumer/producer, local, national, international), and profit distribution. Certain levels of agreement – solidarities, coalition formation, alliances – must be created for concerted collective actions. But class formation does not take place on an even field. Capital possesses organizational, cultural, material, and political advantages that are structurally unavailable to the working class. For example, capital: (1) operates as “organization” (corporate firm) rather than individual from the outset and corporate laws enhance that supra-individual status; (2) creates a culture of superiority by virtue of society’s employment and economic growth dependency on it; and (3) has an enormous economic resource advantage. Moreover, as class analyst Nicos Poulantzas argued in his *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1975), the State’s use of policy, laws, and national offensives typically contributes to solidifying multiple forms of capital while weakening, fragmenting, and disorganizing the working class. This usually means that effective working class formation meets with more difficult and divisive forms of intraclass struggles (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender) than does capital.

When the famous British labor historian E. P. Thompson wrote in his *Making of the English Working Class* (1966) that class is something that happens when people “as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity

of their interests as between themselves, and as against others whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs," he was pointing to this concrete historical process of class formation. Sphere of production relations are most important but not the only relations in this process and certainly should not be understood in a rigid, deterministic fashion. Class is not merely an economic category that expresses itself politically through class struggle. Instead, it is a cultural experience that forms the crucial fibers linking laboring activity, critical class-consciousness, and collective (class) action. Culture is central to the constitution of class and it is in the formation of class culture, solidarity, and community that class conflict – over wages, working conditions, autonomy, poverty, inequality – becomes possible for the working class. Therefore, class and thus conflict between classes is not simply a function of where one stands, but importantly, what one stands for, as [Howard Kimeldorf \(1994\)](#) puts it.

Cooperation in the capitalist labor process – increasingly important as modern capitalism becomes more socially interdependent – has dual channels: Cooperation with capital allows labor to be a significant use-value to capital (the goose that can lay the golden eggs), yet labor is also a potential nightmare, as [Marx \(1973\)](#) wrote in the 1857 manuscripts known as the *Grundrisse*, because, as living subject, labor is "the only use-value that can form the opposite pole to capital." The dual character of cooperation generates prospects for two generally corresponding work cultures: (1) a culture of loyalty and compliance with capitalist demands, purposes, and terms; and (2) an oppositional culture of labor resistance. The latter requires some degree of worker solidarity and is usually present within the former, although the range of its development can be quite wide.

Solidarity among working people runs contrary to the dominant values and themes of competitive, possessive individualism cultivated by pervasive capitalist culture. It is created and expressed by mutual association bonds, organizational capabilities, institutional arrangements, and social values that arise within these relations. Most importantly, "cultures of solidarity", as [Rick Fantasia \(1987\)](#) calls them, are forged by workers in the course of collective struggle as new "maps of meaning" become expressive of a dynamic form of symbolic action. This processual unfolding of oppositional class cultures never occurs in a vacuum but rather is mediated by and contingent on other important social relations, such as gender, race, skill levels, occupational divisions, and so on.

While the twofold character of the commodity-form of value and its expanded form as capital generates the inherently conflictual basis for struggle between capital and labor, this process is always conditional on within-class struggle; that is, whether class conflict actually takes place, the forms it assumes, the extent to which it grows, its successes and failures are all dependent on intra-class struggle in the process of class formation. Thus, division and competition is a problem of class formation for both labor ([Kimeldorf, 1988](#)) and capital ([Haydu, 2008](#)). The next section concentrates on the concrete dimensions and forms of class conflict that have grown out of various oppositional cultures established in the contentious soil of class relations.

Concrete Dimensions of Class Conflict

The scope of class conflict is complex and multidimensional in historical phases, levels, arenas, and forms. Moreover, the internal composition of each form of struggle is multifaceted: it consists of multiple-actor (collective) phenomena composed of multiple actions; that is, within each collective event, multiple actors come together to shape cultural bonds of solidarity and engage in an array of contentious and often quite risky actions. While important historical commonalities exist, class conflict also displays significant historical differentiation in fundamental issues, institutional contexts, and repertoires of collective contention.

Major Historical Phases of Capitalist Imposition

Each historical phase of capitalist development has had its own central point of contention, from capital's point of view, that shapes the repertoire of struggle as well as the institutional formations of particular periods: For example, class conflict has revolved, according to [Harry Cleaver \(1979\)](#), around the fundamental questions of whether the commodity-form could be imposed, how much it could be imposed, and at what price it could continue to be imposed.

Primitive Accumulation and Early Extensive Regimes

This was the period of initial class formation in nascent capitalist society that first occurred through the imposition of work in capitalist agriculture and small-scale commodity production. These processes were carried out in a massive way in England and parts of Western Europe in the "rosy dawn" of capitalism, which was subsequently extended through the restructuring of the existing society and colonialism. However, it certainly was not a foregone conclusion that laboring activity (as a source of new value) could be accomplished as "free" wage labor in the New World. A central axis of struggle and often bloody conflict revolved around precisely this question: could the commodity-form of human life activity be generally imposed? Could labor-power be subsumed (organized and controlled) as "free" wage labor on a sufficiently large scale? Forcefully clearing the land and extending the wage form (from Europe to the Americas) involved a tremendous amount of coercion, violence, and bloodshed. In the New World during this early formative period, "clearing the land" meant more than just removing trees and underbrush; it also meant directly coerced labor of indigenous populations or their removal as well as directly coerced labor of imported peoples in the form of indentured and slave labor. By contrast, there was relatively little "free" wage labor. The key

point is that the commodity-form's spatial extension (across Europe and the New World) and temporal extension (lengthening the working day) was an extraordinarily conflictual and violent process.

For the working classes during this early period, the commodity-form of life was still quite alien. Because capitalist society was not yet thoroughly institutionalized as the normal state of affairs, recently or partially proletarianized workers would struggle with the real prospect of escaping this form of labor imposition. For some, death as mode of escape was preferable to life in the new alien form.

Working Day, Time Discipline, and Intensive Regimes

In locations where the possibilities of avoiding the imposition of wage labor had been reduced or eliminated, the struggle for capital shifted to the question of how much (how intensively) it could be imposed. The first response to this quantitative quest was addressed by extending the length of the working day – the temporal analog to extending the commodity-form across space in, for example, opening the frontier and extending “the market” from Atlantic to Pacific. Capital's unfettered prolongation of the working day, and accumulated human suffering, violence, and worker resistance it brought in its wake, forced capital (via State regulation) to shorten the working day, eventually moving to the eight-hour norm. But that temporal work norm was established only after decades of struggle. Eventually, the shorter working day put pressure on capital that spawned, in turn, a new offensive of productivity/efficiency drives that revolutionized the social organization of the labor process by introducing new machinery, employing day and night shift work, and increasing the intensity of the labor process (i.e., the rate at which labor is pumped out of labor-power) through “scientific management”, “Fordism”, and other productivity enhancement schemes. The generalized imposition of time discipline in the form of the clock and machine-pacing profoundly altered the rhythms of work and nonwork life.

The State, Distributional Struggles, and Productivity Deals

By the 20th century, capitalism had been largely institutionalized in the advanced industrial nations such as the United States. In these locations the dominant forms of class conflict took place within an already imposed wage form of work. Most workers had been thoroughly proletarianized and the general aim of class struggle was no longer escape (although escape did take individualistic forms such as mobility into the ranks of the small entrepreneur or even escapist entertainments), but rather a more equitable distribution of value within the institutions of capitalist democracy. For capital, once the intensive regime of production was established, the fundamental concern shifted to questions of distribution and cost: what price would have to be paid to elicit continual compliance with commodified work on a massive scale? Here the relative relation between the price of labor-power (money wage) and level of productivity (labor extracted per time interval) determines the relative distribution of power in the workplace. At first, large mass production industry dealt with this issue through individual firm strategies (e.g., early Fordist approaches). But during the “long New Deal” (c. 1935–50), capital (via the State) restructured and institutionalized this intensive regime through the new industrial relations system, the Keynesian welfare state, union contracts, “productivity deals,” “accords,” or “social compacts” struck with organized labor. By linking wages and productivity, capital and State attempted to structure institutional conditions such that the working class struggle to drive up the wage level would become the growth motor for a stagnation-prone capitalism. But in this context, workplace discipline and cooperation became more significant and its absence substantially more costly to capital.

Globalization and the Contemporary Capitalist Offensive

By the mid-1970s, the labor-capital accord established at the end of World War II began coming apart. The system that, for two to three decades, made it possible for at least the unionized sector of the American working class to attain middle class consumption patterns had come to an end. The very success of organized labor in economic distributional conflict with capital was one reason for this transformation. At the end of the war the terms of United States capital accumulation could tolerate, even benefit from, the presence of conservative unions in some major industries. But as conditions of world market competition and workplace technologies expanded, unions (always only weakly tolerated, at best, in the United States) became major obstacles to capital accumulation and profit levels established during the years of the accord. Gradually during the 1970s, more rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, and becoming institutionalized in the 2000s and 2010s, corporations began to decouple the productivity deal through what has become known as the “contemporary capitalist offensive” against working people, and neoliberal strategies more broadly. Globalization of markets has generated pressures on capitalist profitability. In turn, corporations launched offensives to transform work and workplaces, “downsizing” the organization to create “lean” (and mean) production processes. Capitalist restructuring – international competition, lean production, neoliberal policies for state austerity – are now bearing down with increasing weight on larger fractions of the working classes in more and more nations of the world.

The severe decline in unionization in the United States was one result of the destruction of the labor–capital accord. It was also importantly a function of overt class assault by corporations against workers, unionized or not. This assault was launched by business and conservative politicians using weapons that included: (1) threat and actual use of permanent replacement of strikers, (2) union decertification procedures, (3) threat and actual use of capital migration and other forms of disinvestment, (4) hiring specialized union-busting consulting firms, (5) common violations of fair labor standards (e.g., illegal intimidation and firing of workers

and violations of NLRB regulations), and (6) converting corporate anti-unionism into government policy, beginning forcefully during the Reagan administration and continuing ever since (see, e.g., Rosenfeld, 2014).

While all capitalist nations have been exposed to an intensified global competition since the 1980s and 1990s, the extent to which this translated into large losses, moderate losses, or no loss for particular national labor movements depended heavily on the historical trajectory of the movement (especially how unionized it was), the degree of centralized bargaining, and the extent to which organized labor controlled the terms of the labor market such as unemployment compensation. The countries that have these conditions and have best weathered the recent attacks on organized labor are the social democratic and, to some extent, the strong corporatist regimes of Western Europe. These are also countries that have relatively low average strike volumes. However, worker militancy may promote unionization in countries (e.g., the US) where labor's institutional control is weak.

Across all four phases of capitalist development, the character of class conflict changed as a result of the extent to which the social environment had been commodified, moving first from direct, personal, often violent coercion to more indirect, impersonal abstract forms of domination. Importantly, this was and remains a continuous two-sided struggle, not simply a one-way manipulation. The level of capitalist productivity entails class conflict over the terms of the labor process, that is, over the duration of labor, the intensity of labor, and the conditions of labor. As a result of this conflict, the commodity-form of life in capitalist society undergoes a metamorphosis through time, a key source of social change.

Levels, Arenas, and Forms of Labor Struggle

Oppositional cultures developed from class domination and degradation spawn diverse forms of resistance that are dependent on historical conditions. Such working class resistance varies by level of intensity, institutional arena, and form.

Everyday Resistance

One meaning of class struggle is the simple recognition that life for the working class, under terms of socially structured class inequality, is a continuous struggle; finding employment, maintaining employment, facing the indignities of class dictatorship in the workplace, acquiring a living wage, fighting class-related health problems, and much more are part of the mundane daily rigors of working class life. Class conflict in the form of everyday resistance, individual and collective, by working people is a common response to these conditions in the workplace. Sometimes resistance manifests itself in arenas other than the workplace, for example, in consumer actions against corporations that make and market particular products.

It is important to recognize that class conflict in the form of everyday resistance by working class people directed against power and authority in the workplace is mostly noninstitutionalized, covert, or subterranean. These "weapons of the weak," as James Scott (1990) calls them, include such acts as soldiering, "working to rule," intentional shoddy work quality, undeclared slowdowns, feigned ignorance, pilfering, accidents, sabotage, and others. Precisely because these "hidden acts of resistance" are covert and undeclared, they are often not identified as class conflict.

If dramatic, romanticized, and infrequent revolutionary upsurges are the tip of the class-conflict iceberg, these everyday forms of resistance constitute its submerged, unseen mass. From capital's point of view, these are the "human problems" of production that must be solved by management and (physical and social) engineering "solutions."

Politicized Movements and Organizations

Class conflict also appears in more overt, highly politicized organizational and social movement forms. These collective actions, for example, strikes, protest demonstrations, and the like, are aimed at achieving political, economic, and even broad social goals through mass mobilizations that agitate for change. The targets of such mobilizations are, most frequently, capitalist employers and the State. This category of actions can take on noninstitutionalized forms – for example, social movements, general strikes, rallies, wildcat strikes – or more routinized, institutional forms of grievance delivery – such as democratic electoral politics (including lobbying, campaign contributions) and unions (including institutionalized strikes, grievance procedures, and arbitration). Often class movements will simultaneously use both noninstitutionalized and institutionalized forms of struggle. The Irish movement, Sinn Fein, is a good example of a strategy that has combined both electoral/party and insurgent social movement actions. The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 (which became a global phenomenon) and the Hong Kong Protests of 2019-2020 show how quickly social movements can form and how powerful they can be. Podemos in Spain is another interesting case.

There is a very complex relation between forms of organized labor as unions and labor movements focused on fundamental forms of social change. Organized labor – both local and international leadership – can play important conditioning roles in forming cultures of cooperation and opposition. However, worker militancy and labor unions are not necessarily isomorphic through time and space. Militant worker cultures have developed in the absence of unions, with the support of unions, and sometimes even despite unions.

Capital, for its part, uses a wide repertoire of actions in class struggle and open conflict. Moving along a continuum of relative intensity, capital is involved in class warfare (which may take the rhetorical delivery of "problems of management," "business decisions," "managerial prerogative," "maintaining order," and so on) through (1) ideological representation and inculcation; (2)

electoral politics, lobbying, control/domination of various parts of the state apparatus; (3) social organization of production and technical design of the labor process (e.g., “downsizing,” “outsourcing,” “flexible production”); (4) formal business associations (e.g., National Association of Manufacturers, Chamber of Commerce); (5) capital investment or disinvestment (e.g., investment strikes against government policies that may be relatively prolabor or redirect capital away from segments of workers [capital flight] to avoid, discipline, weaken labor); and (6) repression, both direct (violent and nonviolent) and indirect (through the State). For example, in United States history capitalists often did not hesitate to use their own private armies, hired guns (e.g., Pinkertons, Baldwin-Felts agents, and many others in the union-busting industry), local vigilantes, or state agents to repress labor, especially during the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. Similar processes of repression by corporate interests and state agents are all too common in many parts of the contemporary world economy (Isaac and Harrison, 2006).

Revolutionary Action

The intensive and overtly dramatic forms of labor revolt or revolutionary action constitute only a small fraction of the conflictual reality inside the commodity-form of social life. These actions are noninstitutionalized mass struggles, often violent, that seek fundamental change in the social organization of society. As Craig Calhoun has argued in *The Question of Class Struggle* (1982), radical and revolutionary mobilizations are most likely to take place in defense of established cultures of thought and action, a reaction by a community with some social resources that are sufficient to confront social transformations that threaten to take everything from them.

Although relatively infrequent, revolutionary forms of class conflict are important for a variety of reasons. Sidney Tarrow (1993, pp. 302–3) captures the significance of revolutionary fervor that often grows inside peak cycles of mass protest:

Few people dare to break the crust of convention. When they do during moments of madness, they create the opportunities and provide the models for others. Moments of madness – seldom widely shared, usually rapidly repressed, and soon condemned even by their participants – appear as sharp peaks on the long curve of history. New forms of contention flare up briefly within them and disappear, and their fate of absorption into the ongoing repertoire is slow and partial. But the cycles they trigger last much longer and have broader influence than the moments of madness themselves; they are, in Zolberg’s words, “like a flood tide which loosens up much of the soil but leaves alluvial deposits in its wake.”

In the advanced capitalist countries, the last major protest cycle, containing potentially revolutionary mass actions occurred during the 1960s, for example, spring 1968 in France, the 1969 *autunno caldo* (“hot autumn”) in Italy, and much of 1968 and 1969 in the United States. However, in none of these instances were major waves of madness constituted solely of workers’ movements. Rather they were sometimes broad amalgams of separate movements merging into a massive movement wave, while at other times they were marked by deep internal division and reaction (e.g., some “hard hat” opposition in the US). Yet this new movement wave of the 1960s–70s – civil rights, Black Power, antiwar, student, women – had an escalating effect on labor militancy in the workplace and even spawned new unionization, especially in the public sector (see Isaac et al., 2006).

According to Beverly Silver and her colleagues (Karatasli et al., 2018) – who have been carefully documenting reports of global social protest from 1851 to 2016 – the world experienced subsequent, smaller waves of global social protest in the 1980s and the early 2010s. They suggest that the uptick in social protest in 2010–14 is indicative of a contemporary “world hegemonic crisis/breakdown,” as capital experiences the limits of its power in peripheral countries. As they point out, in the “early 20th century, core countries such as United States, France, United Kingdom, and Canada were the epicenters of autoworker labor unrest.” Now, however, such unrest is increasingly common in places like India and China. As Beverly Silver puts it, “where capital goes, conflict follows” (Karatasli et al., 2018, p. 14).

Comparative Trends in Class Conflict

How are the class bases of political actions and collective struggles altered, if at all, by the various institutional developments and trajectories of capitalist nations? In other words, are the class bases of politics and collective conflict becoming more or less salient with the historical development of capitalist society? These and related questions were an integral part of capitalist history at the beginning of the 20th century; they continue to be important in the 21st century as well.

During the middle of the 20th century, this question was posed in the wake of depression, fascism, and World Wars. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, models of industrial progressivism and proclamations of the “end of (class) ideology” became hegemonic on both sides of the Atlantic. Much of the working class had acquired what appeared to be stable, long-term incorporation, representation, and citizenship rights in the institutional forms of trade unionism and reformist political parties. Old models of class polarization were pronounced dead; many working class children could aspire to middle class occupations or at least consumption patterns. America became the premier “middle class society” while much of Europe became the home of the “affluent worker.” According to Gösta Esping-Andersen (1994), radical politics of all sorts – left and right – had been replaced by pluralist havens (America) or forms of corporatist representation (Europe).

By the mid-1970s, the institutional foundation of the Fordist–Keynesian regime of production – the productivity/wage deal that made the relatively stable middle class style occupation/consumption trajectory of the working class possible – came undone in

global economic crises. In the midst of restructuring of institutions and markets created by transformations in globalized capitalism, new questions have appeared regarding the trajectory of class conflict in capitalist society and world economy.

Two major opposing lines of argument regarding trends in class conflict have been posed. On one hand, there is the "end of class" thesis which maintains that the political significance of class and class conflict is rapidly declining, if not already totally dead. Post-Fordist industrial shifts have diminished the (manual, blue-collar) industrial working class and its traditional class values, attitudes, political affiliations, and actions. The alternative claim, found in the "re-emergence of class" thesis, argues that new social divisions are growing out of the ashes of the old class divide. Key social processes cultivating new class polarizations are connected to (1) the emergent segmentation between core and periphery workers within nations and between regions of the world and (2) growing inequality, poverty, and marginalized "outsider" underclasses.

Central to the "decline of class and class conflict" argument are claims that entail one or more of the following: (1) the class bases of electoral politics (the arena of "peaceful, democratic class struggle") are weak and have been deteriorating for some time; (2) unions are weak, outmoded, and have been in decline for some time; (3) forms of collective working class militancy, such as strikes, have been waning in effectiveness and use; (4) subjective class identification, language, and rhetoric has been eclipsed by physical attribute identities (such as gender, race, or sexual orientation); and (5) new social movements (said to be nonclass-based or post-materialist) are crowding out the old class-based movements like the labor movement.

However, comparative evidence across nations and arenas of struggle suggest a scenario that is decidedly different from and more complicated than that painted by the universal "decline of class conflict" argument. It is reasonably clear that the conditions, substance, locus, and meanings of class conflict may be changing but there is no general decline and certainly no absolute disappearance of class conflict. These points can be illustrated by examining comparative empirical trends.

Class Conflict in the United States and Other Core Capitalist Nations

Violent class conflict has declined dramatically within the capitalist core nations since the 19th century rise of the modern bourgeoisie and working classes. The use of violence by single industrialists, capitalist organizations, and the State was present in the early phases of labor-management relations in all capitalist countries. It was especially severe in the United States. In fact, violence by capitalists and State against workers' attempts at self-organization in the period from the Gilded Age to World War II is one of the main processes that decisively shaped the US working class into a relatively weak, apolitical trajectory. After World War II, modern industrial relations systems were established which channeled and contained much (not all) class conflict into the relatively non-violent arenas of electoral politics and union representation as American society in particular was thought to be the pluralist middle class haven in a capitalist world.

Electoral Politics: The Nonviolent Democratic Class Struggle

The relationship of class conflict to institutionalized electoral politics has a long history in capitalist nations. During the late 19th and early 20th century, the question of whether socialism could be achieved through the electoral process was very much on the minds of the working class and their class superiors. By the middle of the 20th century, the issue of the "democratic class struggle" in America and Europe had become a major focus of political sociology. In recent decades, a number of studies analyzing the significance of class in American or European electoral politics have sounded a note of weakening class impact. In the new orthodoxy, class has been dealigned from party conflict in electoral arenas as part of the broader decline in the salience of class and class conflict. The empirical basis for this orthodoxy centers, however, on the use of a single flawed measure, the Alford Index.

When measurement of the class basis of voting takes into account important factors like changing occupational distributions and simultaneously examines multiple electoral outcomes (e.g., nonvoting), the data yield a very different picture. [Fig. 1](#) reports the strength of class bases in total vote, party, and turnout using just such a measure developed by Michael Hout and colleagues that avoids the problems of the Alford Index. Using this measure, US presidential elections from the end of World War II into the early 1990s show historical fluctuations, but no evidence of a declining trend in class foundations of the vote that is yielded when the Alford Index is employed. Using data from 1952 to 1992, [Brooks and Manza \(1997, p. 400\)](#) find the class cleavage in US presidential vote choice "exhibits a robustness that appears likely to persist into the future." Unfortunately we cannot check this expectation since these measures have not been updated.

More recently, [Hout and Laurison \(2014\)](#) suggest a realignment of political affiliation based on class position. As can be seen in their research (based on the General Social Survey), choice of political party (measured by whether or not respondents voted for the Democratic candidate from 1972 to 2008) has remained fairly constant for managers and the self-employed for the last few decades. However, it has shifted leftward for professionals and white-collar workers (who increasingly are voting Democrat), and shifted rightward for skilled and unskilled workers (who are increasingly voting Republican).

Esping-Andersen summarized major patterns from a variety of studies of European electoral politics. Among the Scandinavian nations, Sweden shows the greatest stability in the left vote. Approximately two-thirds of the electorate voted for the Social Democrats in 1968, during the 1970s, and as recently as 1988. In Norway and Denmark, where the Social Democrats were traditionally less dominant than in Sweden, there has been some decline in working class support (e.g., in Norway the base diminished from about 60%–63% in the 1970s to 42% in 1990). However, the Social Democratic decline in these two cases has been offset by a modest shift in working class support to the more leftist Socialist Peoples' parties in those two countries.

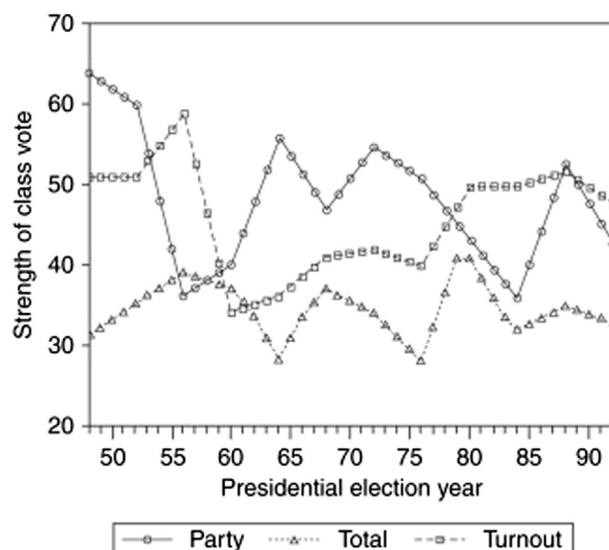


Figure 1 Class bases of electoral politics: United States, 1948–92. Data are from Hout, M., Brooks, C, Manza, J., 1995. Class voting in capitalist democracies since World War II. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 60, 805–828.

There is also a mixed pattern for the corporatist states of continental Europe from the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, according to Esping-Andersen. Belgium and Germany experienced increased working class support for the left, Italy's working class shows stable support, while the Netherlands and France experienced small and modest declines, respectively. But the left parties in these countries also gained some white-collar support. Britain, on the other hand, appears to have undergone more dramatic deterioration in working class support for the left. This can be seen most recently in Boris Johnson's electoral victory in December 2019.

Unions: Comparative Trends

Unions matter in class relations because they can serve as workers' self-organization, a vehicle for mobilizing resources in class struggles in the workplace and beyond. In particular, unions matter because they (1) offer some protection against blatant workplace despotism, that is, arbitrary and capricious actions by employers, (2) contribute to societal well-being by increasing economic equality, (3) struggle to improve the quality of working conditions and the rights of workers as citizens, and (4) give workers a collective voice that can foster dissent, the cornerstone of democracy.

Data on unionization for core capitalist democracies from 1950 through 2015 followed roughly three basic trajectories. First, high levels coupled with increasing trends are best reflected in the paths of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. By the mid-1980s, between 70% and 90% of the work forces in these countries were unionized. Second, a large and diverse group of countries such as Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom have experienced relatively stable unionization with between 35% and 60% of their labor forces unionized. The third group of nations has relatively low unionization. These countries, including France, Japan, Holland, Switzerland, and the United States, have suffered the greatest unionization declines in recent decades. Finally, Italy is a major exception to these three relatively consistent trends. Italian union density (percentage of the labor force unionized) increased in the late 1960s and early 1970s before declining in the 1980s. Fig. 2 shows union density trajectories for one country reflecting each of these four broad patterns – Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Italy – for the years 1960 through 2015.

Both worker self-organization and disorganization show variable time-paths even when driven by globally intensified hyper-competition beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s. Those countries where unions were able to grow under adverse global competition were those with already high union densities nurtured by strong centralized corporatist bargaining institutions and union control of unemployment insurance arrangements. Conversely, those countries where labor organizations were most seriously weakened had relatively low union densities to begin with, decentralized bargaining, no union control of unemployment insurance, large shifts to service sector employment and unfavorable economic conditions. Within this group of nations, the United States stands out for its antilabor industrial relations system and class assaults launched against workers (organized or not) in decades prior to World War II and again in the decades since the 1980s.

Electoral politics and unions are both institutional manifestations of class and other forms of conflict. But what about the trajectory of more blatant conflict like strikes and other dimensions of working class militancy?

Strikes: Comparative Trends

The modern strike began to appear in most Western countries at various points in the 19th century. This form of collective action developed out of the ongoing struggles and conflicts between key class actors – wage workers, employers, state officials – that were

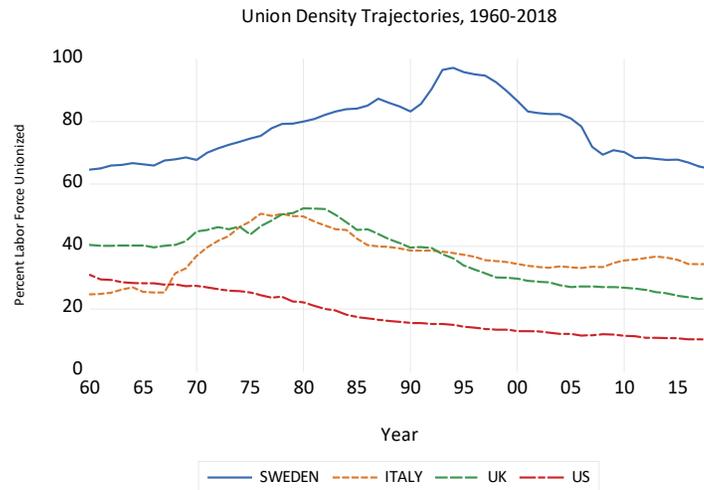


Figure 2 Union density: select capitalist core nations, 1960–2015.

Average Annual Strike Volume in Several Capitalist Nations, 2009-2018

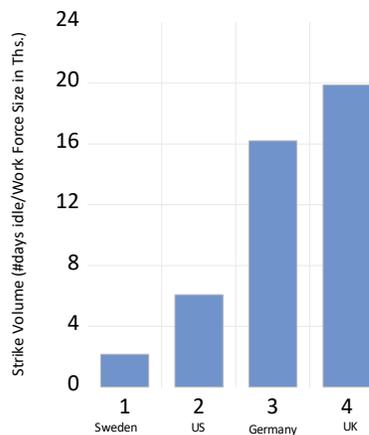


Figure 3 Strike volume: select capitalist core nations, 2009–18.

forged by the development of modern industrial capitalism. These conflictual relations ultimately defined the rules and institutionalization of acceptable forms of protest. But what of the general trajectory of the strike in recent decades?

Fig. 3 illustrates comparative strike patterns in four different advanced capitalist countries – Sweden, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States – for the years 2009 through 2018. In particular, this figure plots country-specific temporal strike volume, that is, the number of strike days annually per 1000 workers in a particular country.

Since World War II, the country-specific strike trajectories show substantial variation (see Isaac et al., 2008, p. 286). Sweden, characteristic of the Scandinavian Social Democratic regimes, has had a low average strike activity level with no real trend over the postwar decades. The only major deviation from this pattern occurred in 1980 when strike volume spiked as a result of accumulating worker grievances under deteriorating economic conditions and the first non-Social Democratic administration in decades.

Germany, a relatively strong corporatist regime, has also been marked by a low average annual strike level, characteristic of France as well. On the other hand, Italy, a weak corporatist regime, has had a remarkably high average annual strike level. In fact, it is the highest postwar average of all the 18 major Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development capitalist core nations. As for trends, both France and Italy have experienced fluctuating declines since the peak protest waves of spring 1968 and autumn 1969, respectively. Germany has experienced a modest increasing trend although the level of strike activity is low relative to other countries.

The Liberal market-centered regimes, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, display generally high average annual strike volume. However, trends across these nations vary: Canada and the United States have both followed relatively smooth declining trajectories since the early 1970s, while the United Kingdom shows an increasing trend punctuated by major spikes in 1972, 1979, and 1984. By 1996, Spain, Italy, Germany, France, and Britain had all shown significant signs of an upward trend in levels of industrial strike actions.

Table 2 Studies of the conditions of strike violence

<i>Study</i>		
Taft and Ross (1969)	US, 1880s–1960s	Strikes over union organization and recognition are more likely to be violent
Shorter and Tilly (1971)	France, 1890–1935	Larger and longer strikes are more likely to be violent
Snyder and Kelly (1976)	Italy, 1878–1903	Strike violence is enhanced by multiple issue strikes launched by weakly organized and poorly disciplined workers
Grant and Wallace (1991)	Ontario, Canada 1958–67	Regime repressiveness mutes strike violence Strike violence is enhanced by aggressive tactics employed by labor or management, high proportion of low-skilled workers, and pro-labor party in power presidential election year mutes probability of strike violence
Lipold and Isaac (2009)	US, 1870–1970	Strike deaths trended from northeast to midwest then west and south; most heavily concentrated in transportation and extraction industries; strikers most likely victims; most deaths concentrated between 1877 and 1947
Lipold (2014)	US, 1877–1947	Probability of strike fatalities increases with struggles over union recognition, and under conditions of economic desperation and anti-labor political regimes.

In the east, Japan is an interesting and important case. Throughout the 20th century, the Japanese labor movement was plagued by two prominent divisions. On the one hand, the moderates supported the capitalist system, viewed labor and capital's interests as one, and deprecated strike actions. On the other hand, the radical faction sought the abolition of the capitalist system and advocated the use of strikes to achieve worker rights and social justice. For cultural and political reasons, the moderates gained the upper hand. Partially as a result, Japan developed "enterprise unionism" organized on a paternalistic-company basis rather than a geographic, industry, or trade foundation. Moreover, strike action became widely perceived as intimately associated with antisocial, anti-State, and anticapitalist views. More recently, Japan has been reasonably successful in containing overt class conflict within the core industries (e.g., autos) through corporate strategies that combine the "dualistic approach" (good working conditions, wages, lifetime employment security for some, while many others work in smaller outsourcing firms with the opposite conditions) and the "lean and mean approach."

Some strikes turn violent, while others that are also highly contentious do not. What do we know about the variability in strike violence? Beyond the general recognition that the level of violence between workers and employers tended to be much more widespread during the 19th and early 20th centuries, there are few studies that have analyzed the conditions that cause strike violence. **Table 2** summarizes the key findings from five prominent studies.

In general, strikes tend to become violent when (1) they are large, long, and involve multiple issues, especially union organization and recognition; (2) they are staged mostly by low-skilled workers who are weakly organized or undisciplined or when workers face economic desperation; or (3) either labor or management engages in aggressive or provocative tactics. We know from historical scholarship that the likelihood of violence would be increased when employers used replacement workers ("scabs") and armed force to break strikes. On the other hand, repression and presidential election periods appear to be political regime characteristics that mute strike violence. While reigning pro-labor administrations tend to also be associated with greater violence in Grant and Wallace's Canadian study, this tends to contradict the well-known evidence that strikes (violent or not) are much less likely under long-term social democratic labor regimes, and it also contradicts Lipold's US evidence on the exacerbating impact of antilabor regimes on strike fatalities. The Grant and Wallace finding may, therefore, be peculiar to Canada or political economies in which labor parties do not control power for lengthy periods of time. Although these several studies are useful, more detailed comparative-historical case studies are necessary to gain greater insights on the strike violence question.

Strikes: US Patterns

The history of the modern strike in the United States began on a large, national scale in the decade following the Civil War. The first major national-level action, signaling the emergence of a militant national working class, occurred in the 1877 general railroad strike. This massive work stoppage not only required State militia, the national army, and substantial violence to quell it, but in its aftermath it also led to the proliferation of armories across US cities and the establishment of local elite militias and vigilante groups.

From the late 19th century to the final years of the twentieth, long-term trends in US strike frequency show no general upward or downward pattern. However, this long history has been punctuated regularly with major strike waves. Edwards (1981) documents major strike waves in 1886, 1887, 1903, 1933, 1934, 1937, and 1944. Other extremely important wave years (not meeting Edwards' strict quantitative criteria) include the World War I wave (1916–22, especially 1919); the post-World War II wave (1945–46); and the wave from 1967 to 1971. Fig. 4 lists the annual frequency of big strikes (i.e. those with more than 1000 participants) in the United States from 1947 to 2018. Beginning around 1980, large strikes declined precipitously in the US, and became decoupled from wage increases (Rosenfeld, 2014) as anti-labor forces grew more aggressive.

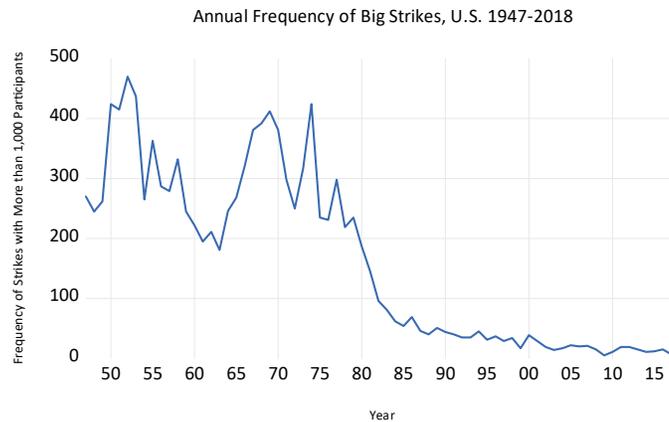


Figure 4 Annual Frequency of Big Strikes in the United States, 1947–2018.

Prior to the institutionalization of the modern industrial relations system (c. 1947–50), labor-management confrontations were certainly much more violent. Quite commonly, workers would confront the powerful forces of employer militias, State militias, and even the army, with bloody consequences resulting disproportionately for workers. A number of these events were so severe that labor historians refer to them as “massacres.” But workers learned, too, the power of their numbers and strategic location in the production system when solidarity could be maintained on a broad level. The “general strike” that overflows single workplaces to involve large portions of whole communities or even multiple communities, is a major example of this process of extensive working class solidarity. Many of the general strikes involved considerable bloodshed as industrialists and State agents attempted to intimidate workers and break the communal culture that sustained the strike. In fact, some labor massacres happened in the context of general strikes; and general strikes are typically embedded within mass strike wave years (e.g., 1877, 1886, 1894, 1919, 1946) and broader “cycles of mass protest” that often produced important social change in American society. Table 3 summarizes major cases of these two classes of extraordinary events – general strikes and labor massacres – in US history between 1877 and 1947.

As the United States was transformed from an agricultural to manufacturing to a service-oriented economy, there have been important shifts in the industrial distribution of strike activity. Labor historian, Melvyn Dubofoky, points out that from the 1880s to World War I, strikes were typically local in character and most likely used by skilled workers concentrated in construction, needle, printing, mining, and transportation trades. During the war years, 1916–19, strikes began to move increasingly to the

Table 3 Labor massacres and general strikes: United States, 1877–1947

Year	Location	Year	Location
General strikes			
1877	National Rail Strike	1934	Textiles (AL, GA, NC SC, TN, N. England)
1886	Chicago, IL		
1892	Homestead, PA	1935	Terre Haute, IN
1892	New Orleans, LA	1936	Pekin, IL
1894	Pullman, IL	1937	Wilmington, NC
1910	Philadelphia, PA	1937	Lansing, MI
1917	Springfield, IL	1946	Stamford, CT
1917	Billings, MT	1946	Lancaster, PA
1918	Kansas City, MO	1946	Rochester, NY
1918	Waco, TX	1946	Oakland, CA
1919	Seattle, WA	1946	Pittsburgh, PA
1934	San Francisco, CA	1946	Hartford, CT
1934	Toledo, OH	1946	Houston, TX
1934	Minneapolis, MN	1946	Camden, NJ
Massacres			
1886	Chicago, IL (Haymarket)	1919	Elaine, AR
1897	Lattimer, PA	1922	Herrin, IL
1914	Ludlow, CO	1937	Chicago, IL (Little Steel Strike)
1915	Everett, WA	1938	Hilo, HA
1919	Centralia, WA		

Source: Issac et al. (2008).

factories and became substantially more national in scope. Through the decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, workers in mass production factories grew increasingly strike-prone and likely to participate in multi-plant, multi-employer nationwide stoppages. Workers in the construction trades continued to employ frequent local strikes, while strikes in rails, mines, and clothing trades were diminishing in frequency. Since the mid-1960s, strikes have declined in all the extractive and manufacturing sectors of the economy while expanding substantially in the service and professional sectors, especially among public sector workers. While overall strike levels in the United States have been rather low, in 1996 and 2000 they spiked, and then surged again in 2018–19 largely due to teachers' strikes.

Finally, there is the issue of strike effectiveness as a worker tactic used in class conflict. While there is every reason to believe that the strike will continue to be an important form of collective action within the working class repertoire of class contention, there is evidence that it has been weakened since the establishment of the modern industrial relations regime after World War II. As McCammon (1994) has shown, the state's legal intervention into workplace conflict through major legislative acts and Supreme Court decisions have disorganized (by making illegal) precisely those forms of collective worker action that posed the greatest challenge to employer authority and capitalist institutions. Consequently, strikes over the right to unionize or over work rules ("control strikes") have declined dramatically in the post-World War II decades. Simultaneously, worker challenges have been structured into strikes over wages and other remunerative issues prompting the characterization of narrow economic "business unionism". Workplace class conflict has also been directed away from more spontaneous and unpredictable forms of labor contention such as midterm contract and wildcat strikes as well as broad-based solidarity actions, for example, sympathy and general strikes. Instead, worker actions have been channeled into collective bargaining, arbitration, and even wage strikes that tend to occur in a ritualistic, regularized fashion at contract expirations. Since the early 1980s and the advent of concessionary bargaining, even these relatively conservative wage strikes have lost what little sting they might have had in many industrial sectors.

As with class bases of electoral politics and unionization, there have been those who have claimed that capitalist development would also cause the strike to "wither away." However, there is no convincing evidence for such a general conclusion. Instead, the comparative strike data show quite mixed trajectories that seem to have a generalized global component, but depend most heavily on nation-specific histories and conditions – labor movements, labor laws, industrial relations and state regimes. In fact, the evidence suggests that strike activity declines and tends to stabilize at relatively low levels only when labor-oriented social democratic parties are successful in acquiring stable, long-term control over government and industrial relations apparatus; that is, labor movements tend to deradicalize with, not so much capitalism *per se*, but rather with the expansion of the welfare state and institutionalized class conflict that is labor-oriented. The Scandinavian social democracies are major cases in point. However, even within these strong corporatist social democratic regimes, large annual spikes of strike activity, albeit infrequent, indicate that the strike, as a form of class conflict, has not been extinguished.

Evidence regarding trends in class voting, unionization, and strike activity are summarized for several major capitalist nations in Table 4. The weight of the comparative data indicates a highly mixed set of trajectories in conventional forms of class conflict. Within the advanced capitalist core nations, anyway, there have been important shifts in the form, location, and composition of these arenas of class conflict. However, it would be foolish to suggest that class conflict is withering away. But what about global patterns that extend beyond the most wealthy capitalist core nations?

Non-core Patterns of Unrest in the Twenty-First Century

Comparable and reliable data on unionization and strike activity are even more difficult to come by for countries outside the capitalist core nations. But some crude patterns can be discerned. In general, within the increasingly important developing Pacific-rim

Table 4 Trends in arenas of class conflict: select capitalist core nations

<i>Regime type/country</i>	<i>Electoral politics^a</i>	<i>Union density^b</i>	<i>Strikes^c</i>
Traditional corporatist			
Germany	Leaning right	Small decline	Small increase, spike 2015
Italy	Leaning right	Small increase	No data
France	Centrist	Stable	Stable, spike 2010
Social democratic			
Denmark	Leaning left	Small decline	Small decline, spike 2013
Norway	Leaning left	Small decline	Small decline, spikes 2010, 2012
Sweden	Leaning left	Small decline	Small decline, spikes 2010, 2012
Liberal market-centered			
Canada	Leaning left	Stable	Small decline, spikes 2104, 2015
United Kingdom	Leaning right	Small decline	Small decline, spikes 2011, 2014
United States	Leaning right	Big decline	Big decline, small surge 2018–19

^aBased on political ideology of winners of last national election prior to December 2019.

^bTrend in union density, 2008 to 2018, data from OECD.

^cTrend in strike volume, 2008 to 2018. Data from International Labor Organization; European Trade Union Institute, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Table 5 Union density in several noncore Asian countries

Decade	Country			
	Hong Kong	Singapore	S. Korea	Taiwan
1950s	NA	NA	NA	NA
1960s	15.0	NA	8.9	19.0
1970s	21.2	28.6	15.1	23.4
1980s	17.4	21.4	19.1	30.6
1990s	21.1	16.6	14.6	45.2
2000s	NA	23.7	12.0	39.0
2010s	23	27	9	NA

Note: Figures represent union members as a percentage of the total paid employees. "NA" indicates data not available.

Sources: Isaac et al. (2008); <https://tradingeconomics.com>; <https://www.forbes.com>; <http://todayonline.com>; Lee and Man (2013).

Asian countries, unionization patterns are mixed but do show slow growth trends. Unionization data for several of the noncore Asian countries offer interesting examples. **Table 5** reports union density by decade from the 1950s into the early years of the present century for Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. While the trends across these decades are not particularly clear in the cases of Hong Kong and Singapore, both South Korea and especially Taiwan have (until only recently) shown signs of union growth although their unionization levels are below those of Hong Kong and Singapore.

Because class conflict can manifest itself in so many different ways, each subject to temporal and cultural transmutations, our focus on electoral, union, and strike activity is not without limitations. Both electoral politics and unions are institutionalized forms born of prior conflicts, but they can also serve to shape and contain subsequent class conflicts in certain ways. Even the more overt form of conflict found in the strike has limitations for mapping class conflict; for example, it is a narrow form of class conflict; there are problems of equivalent meaning across time and space; and there are very limited data available for long-term, global comparisons.

The World Labor Group (WLG) at the State University of New York (Binghamton) Fernand Braudel Center has been working to overcome these problems and has produced a more comprehensive measure of "labor unrest" as an important indicator of class conflict. They define their measure of labor unrest as "all the observable resistances and reactions by human beings to being treated as a commodity, both at the point of production and in the labor market. It includes all consciously intended, open acts of resistance. It also includes 'hidden' forms of resistance when these are widespread, collective practices." These scholars point out that the main strength of their measure resides in its ability to identify and map waves of labor militancy as turning points in class conflict.

Data on "labor unrest" from the WLG project are displayed annually in **Fig. 5** from 1906 to 1990. Two series are shown. One represents the capitalist core nations (here that includes Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and the US); the other series combines indices for the semiperiphery and periphery regions of the world.

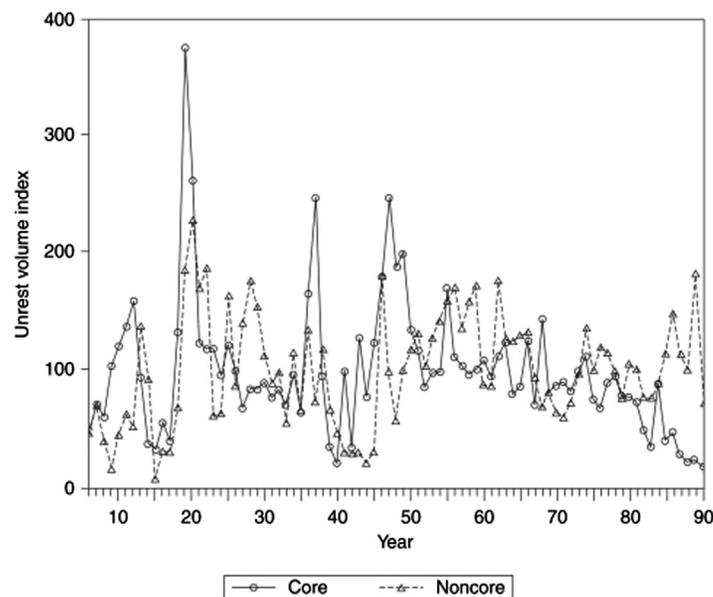


Figure 5 Global labor unrest, 1906–90: capitalist core and noncore countries. Data are from: Silver, B. J., 1995. World-scale patterns of labor-capital conflict: Labor unrest, long waves, and cycles of world hegemony. Review XVIII, Appendix 2.

Fig. 5 illustrates several important points. First, there is no clear overall or long-term trend in labor unrest for either core or non-core areas of the world over the 20th century. Second, major global labor unrest troughs occurred during the two world wars while major peaks happened in the immediate wartime aftermaths. Third, since the 1970s the core showed some reduction of labor unrest as the noncore regions registered a substantial upturn in activity.

Global and zonal labor unrest waves are significant beyond simply gauging the relative intensities of class conflict. For example, plausibly important links exist between such waves and global war as well as other major processes of social change such as, new state policies, shifts in institutional structures, transformations in the location, and social organization of labor processes. Restructuring and relocation processes are very much part of the reversal in labor unrest change patterns between core and noncore countries in recent years. Silver captures this spatial redistribution of conflict in the following words:

The upturn in labor unrest in the semiperiphery and periphery can be interpreted as “the other side of the coin” of the continuing downward trend in the core. The geographical relocation of capital – as a mechanism for evading and undermining the bargaining power of labor – has played an important role in containing overt militancy in the core. The (threatened and actual) elimination of jobs in mass production industry has become an increasingly potent weapon on the side of capital since the early 1970s. Relocation, however, has proved to be a double-edged sword: labor movements in areas from which capital emigrates are undermined, but new working classes are created (and over time strengthened) in the sites to which capital migrates. [Silver \(1995, p. 181\)](#).

Moreover, there can be serious costs to capital for its labor-controlling organizational decisions. The US auto industry, for example, has hampered its competitive position as a result of such decisions (see [Murray and Schwartz, 2019](#)).

The successes of these conflict-containment aspects of class struggle undertaken by capital and core states depends on (1) their ability to continually “externalize” or “export” the most contradictory elements of class conflict to the noncore regions of the world, and (2) the willingness of Third World regimes to repress labor and human rights.

The level of labor exploitation by employers was, in general, higher in the semiperiphery and periphery than in the core even before globalization processes began in the 1970s. That gulf continues to grow. The contemporary system of global capitalism produces grotesque inequality (between enormous wealth and dire poverty) and growing class conflict of both the latent and overt varieties. The rhetoric of economic globalization has taken on a force of its own as corporate power brokers use their formidable propaganda machines to sell workers and ordinary citizens on the inevitable and beneficial “primacy of markets over politics, and of capital over labor” in a globally linked economy.

The new business globalization refers most centrally to multinational capitalist “enterprise” moving through a process of serial capital migration around the globe. Firms move into labor surplus regions to enjoy the labor cost advantages that exist until upward wage pressures and worker militancy begin to develop. They, then, move on to other poorer regions and repeat the process. In this great surge of “flexible” open, free-market migration, multinationals “cream” the poor countries for cheap and relatively docile labor, and they do so with the collaborative repression provided by governing elites in those countries. As [W. Greider \(1997, p. 32\)](#) writes: “The economics of globalization ... relies upon a barbaric transaction – the denial of individual rights – as a vital element of profitability.”

Globalization is swelling conflict in the peripheral and semiperipheral poor regions of the world. In country after country, clashes between workers and authorities, often violent in form, are happening with increasing frequency as people struggle collectively for human rights, worker rights, and demands for political and economic improvements. Thousands of wildcat strikes, “flash protests,” and riots have been reported in the press but these often do not get reported in the official strike statistics.

These new working-class militants are disproportionately young, inexperienced, women who toil in sweat shops making shoes, shirts, watches, toys, and electrical appliances for export. They brave the enormous odds erected by companies, police, paramilitary squads, military troops, their own government officials, and often cultural norms that prohibit any form of aggressive action by women. Since strikes and other labor actions are typically illegal in developing countries, these workers are defying the law. Yet their actions occur with increasing frequency even when these simple collective expressions of defiance can easily be repaid with long prison terms or much worse.

Repressive labor regimes and authoritarian politics tend to be characteristic magnets for globalized capital expansion. What draws corporations to many locations around the world is the recognition that labor surpluses allow extraordinarily low wage rates along with governments that prevent workers from doing anything about it. As [W. Greider \(1997\)](#) put it: “Corporations and governments, such as Indonesia’s, seek prosperity for the few by curbing unions and suppressing workers.” In fact, many of the national economic “miracles” of recent decades in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries have been aided and abetted by the repression of basic human rights. This was the case in China’s democracy rebellion in 1989, and now that Hong Kong is ruled by the Beijing regime, workers there are confronting hostility from both the new government and the business elite.

Similar stories of labor repression can be found abundantly in other times and places. The Mexican state (and quasi state) response to the Zapatista Uprising in the 1990s provides a tragic example of the deadly violence often meted out against those who organize against the status quo. On December 22, 1997, just days before the Christmas holidays, 45 men, women, and children were massacred in the small town of Acteal in the Highlands of Chiapas. The dead were reportedly supporters of the left-wing (i.e. worker, and Indian-friendly) Zapatista National Liberation Army (ZNLA); the assailants were State-trained paramilitary units affiliated with the government. The Mexican police did not intervene to stop the bloodshed.

Another illustration of lethal tactics used by capital to subjugate can be seen a continent away. On August 16, 2012, state police opened fire on platinum miners engaged in a wildcat strike for higher wages in Marikana, South Africa. They killed 34 mineworkers and seriously injured another 78. Despite claims to have acted in self-defense, no police were reported to have been killed or severely injured on that day.

As powerful as the rhetoric of globalization is today, we must understand that it does not happen through automatic motion of inexorable economic laws or imperatives. Economic globalization is driven by political-strategic decisions rooted in material interests that seek superprofits, often in open disregard for human rights. Corporate exits, or threats to exit, to play the widening serial capital migration game, may be given their possibility through changing economic and technical conditions, but their realization is contingent on politics – government policies that facilitate the exit in the country of origin and government repression of workers in country of destination.

This “globalization” strategy will extract a price at home and abroad. The time necessary for a significant accumulation of the costs associated with contradictory containments poses an important remaining question: what direction is class conflict likely to take in the future?

Class Conflicts in the 21st Century

Capitalism contains an enormous transformative capacity. But no single class is THE transformative agent of the future. It is not capitalists as such, nor State agents or workers, but rather the inherently contradictory dialectical character of the class relation and the structured forms of cooperation that are built into the workings of capitalism itself, that constitute the transformative dynamic of society. The analytical difficulty is that capitalist dynamics do not have a single concrete trajectory or a single potential future. The path actually taken depends heavily on past history and current class struggles that are shaping the terrain on which future struggles will unfold. What, then, might be the most likely future for class conflict in the early 21st century?

One possibility, in line with the “decline of class and class conflict” prognostications, is that class conflict will disappear. Based on the evidence reviewed above, this does not seem a likely scenario. In fact, there are two very serious conceptual errors in the withering away of class conflict theories. For one, such arguments typically mistake a downward movement in a cycle (e.g., 50–60 year long cycles in global capitalist boom-and-bust) of militancy for a long-term trend. The second problem is that they fail to grasp the multidimensionality and fluidity of class conflict; that is, it does not always manifest itself in precisely the same locations and in the same forms. In fact, in the very process of class struggle the meaning of class might be transmuted into a conflict that is thought to be based on race or gender relations rather than class. The main point is that so long as the world is organized on principles of class domination, exploitation, and extreme inequality, class conflict will not simply “wither away.” In fact, if past long waves of capitalist reorganization and massive class conflict are any indication, the next large wave of class confrontation could very well occur in the not-so-distant future. The apparent increase in global social protest noted by Karatasli et al. (2018) may well be indicative of a newly contentious period for humanity (see also Harrison, 2004; Harrison, 2020).

A second possibility is the construction of a new institutionalized “class truce,” “accord,” or new “social contract,” perhaps similar to the one put in place in the aftermath of World War II. This could conceivably happen within the next generation, but is not likely without other major social changes taking place first. For such an institutional reordering to have a real chance, capital must be generally and seriously threatened; that is, there must be a major crisis (e.g., global economic disaster or world war induced by a major North–South conflict over the distribution of world surplus-value) combined with a mobilized working class that is sufficiently strong to be taken seriously.

It is certainly possible to understand the currency of the decline of class arguments when one selectively reads historical conditions. While there is rampant social inequality in the United States, this has not translated into widespread, sustained political organization or action on the part of the working class or progressive allies, although the Occupy Movement and Black Lives Matter have certainly put extreme inequality back on the radar screen. Currently, income and wealth inequality in the US “is not only higher than it has been since the 1920s, but [it is also] higher than that of any of the world’s other developed nations” (Lardner, 2005, p. 15). The ethic described by Moyers almost two decades ago continues to ring true today:

[W]hat is being done to middle-class and working class Americans and the poor – and to the workings of American democracy – is deadly serious ... The unmitigated plunder of the public trust has spread a spectacle of corruption across America. For its equivalent one has to go back to the first Gilded Age, when the powerful and the privileged controlled politics, votes were bought and sold, legislatures corrupted, and laws flagrantly disregarded, threatening the very foundations of democracy. It was a time – now is another – when the great captains of industry and finance could say, with Fredrick Townsend Martin, ‘We are rich. We own America. We got it, God knows how, but we intend to keep it.’

Moyers (2005, pp. 12–13)

Recently Warren Buffet echoed Martin’s proclamation when in 2004 he quipped “If there was a class war, my class won.” One indication of how the balance of power has shifted on this terrain is the fact that “in American workplaces today, employees can be compelled to listen to the presentations on the evils of unions but are forbidden to meet for the purposes of forming one,” Lardner says. Class conflict is about the process of class formation and de-formation, an important part of which consists in the stories,

narratives about class conflicts historically, their victories and defeats. History and collective memory are essential to understanding the world in class terms.

For the working class to gain in strength, substantially more class conflict will likely have to take place. We can read the signs in current social circumstances. The face and actions of the working class will continue to change following some of the patterns that are already becoming clear. Globalization processes will likely continue to batter workers. Unless the working people of the core nations, such as the United States, want their living standards to continue declining toward the global lowest common denominator, the labor movement must gain enormous national strength and forge relations of solidarity with progressive allies and with labor movements in other parts of the world. The global social justice movement that burst on the scene through the streets of Seattle in 1999 is an indication that such cross-national solidarity can be achieved. The goal should be a leveling-up of the living standards in the periphery and semi periphery, not a leveling-down in the core. With the resurgence of organized labor in the past several years, there are some hopeful signs. Organized labor in the United States, for example, is attempting to regain its activism and movement vigor, to once again become a social movement unionism rather than the conservative business unionism of the past several decades. Reminiscent of the surge of worker militancy in the 1930s with the split of the insurgent CIO from the AFL, an insurgent rupture of the US labor movement has recently taken place. In the midst of declining trends in union density, it is important to recognize, too, that there have been some big union victories. For example, in Las Vegas, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees have made substantial gains. Because of the union, Las Vegas hotels "now pay middle-class wages and offer health benefits, and men and women who start out cleaning rooms can hope to enter the ranks of management eventually."

Forms of class conflict will change, too. New technologies, strategies, and organizational forms often used to more efficiently subordinate, discipline, and displace labor, will produce new contradictions as they are turned against capital. Several recent instances illustrate the point. First, there have already been class conflicts played out in cyberspace. For example, in response to downsizing at Bridgestone/Firestone, members of the technically sophisticated International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union fought back with mass salvos of email protests to CEOs and "hotlinks" into Bridgestone's homepage that announced to the world the workers' story of struggle with their company. Second, "just-in-time" (JIT) production schemes are proving to be more vulnerable to strikes than previous Fordist mass production. Especially in industries such as autos, the JIT approach to minimizing production inventory costs has meant that strikes in parts supply plants have a much greater impact than old arrangements in which inventories contained substantial buffer stock. The series of successful strikes against General Motors during the first half of 1997 is a good example. Third, part of the new "flexible production" ensemble is capital mobility. As capital roams the globe, settling in regions where labor is weakest and most exploitable, it cultivates precisely the conditions it seeks to avoid – the antagonist is brought on stage. In location after location, capital plants the seeds of new labor movements.

Over time, capitalism recomposes social classes and creates a shifting terrain on which those classes struggle. For instance, great historical transformations are currently reshaping the world's largest nations, as China, Russia, and India have become more integrated into the capitalist world economy. New terrain and peoples are rapidly incorporated into forms of capitalist expansion and exploitation. Significant illustrations include Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, countries presently underbidding even China for the attention of multinational corporate investment. In recent decades, the working class within advanced capitalist nations has changed in composition and appearance. For example, in the United States, the traditionally male, blue-collar, mass production worker is being replaced by female (and minority) service workers. Signs of discontent are especially high among public sector service workers and many professionals. Even physicians are beginning to organize (Budrys, 1996). But if the potential for a new, more vibrant, working class formation is to be realized, working people, as always, must overcome serious divisions (e.g., race, gender, occupational) that weaken them as a class. If this fundamental goal of class formation is unsuccessful, an all too likely future is one in which race, ethnic, and religious hatreds are cultivated in even more virulent strains than those we now face.

What will the working classes of the 21st century struggle to attain? In general, these are likely to be old goals but on a new and shifting terrain. An important part of the agenda will include expanded democracy. In the peripheral regions of the world, this will take the form of struggles for basic human rights and civil rights necessary for even meager political democracy. In the advanced core nations, where forms of political democracy are currently threatened, the drive will be toward protection of existing rights and mobilizations for expanded socioeconomic democracy that attempts to weaken the ravages of capital and market vagaries while giving more autonomy and power to working people.

Globalization in the form of economic neoliberalism is creating a new and rapidly shifting terrain. The global liberalization of the "movement of goods and capital has in particular spread an image of the growing inability of national governments to intervene in the major economic and social problems (starting with unemployment), with the determination in particular policies for reducing inequality," Della Porta et al. (2006) say. The global social justice movement fomenting a "globalization from below" is linked antithetically to the spread of economic neoliberalism and tendentially in solidarity with labor movements. By stressing market self-regulation, neoliberalist strategies intensify difficulties of representative democracy. Here the global social justice movement may well signal the emergence of a demand for a new politics, one predicated on a global public sphere.

For many the dream remains a democracy that overcomes capitalism. This would involve nothing short of the elimination of the working class through the destruction of the wage form of social value. The withering away of class and class conflict would necessitate the end of commodified laboring arrangements in which people work for and as capital and all that is sacred within that form of social organization, for example, destructive "work ethics" and productivity expansions as the panacea for all social ills.

Neoliberal economic globalization will continue to shape the terrain and terms of the class struggle, and the future can be read from signs in the present. As Brecher and Costello (1998) write, "movements have emerged in many parts of the world to resist the

effects of globalization. Their immediate goals have included saving jobs, restoring wage cuts, stopping toxic dumping, preserving small farms, subsidizing life necessities, redistributing land, blocking or revising trade agreements, winning labor rights, preventing privatization, preserving minimum wages and job security, and many others. Their tactics have included electoral politics, strikes and general strikes, civil disobedience and civil disturbances, marches, demonstrations, letter writing campaigns, legislative lobbying, and even armed uprisings." There are also many who understand that capitalism is a human construction and believe it is possible to invent a new "moral economy" in capitalist states that reinvents the wage relation with a more human face.

The old struggles and conflicts that started with the emergence of capitalism continue today and will undoubtedly be with us through the 21st century. Throughout the history of this class conflict, capital has not always won, but it has generally held the upper hand. At the current historical moment that hand is squeezing especially hard and political conditions are generally quite grim. In today's world, the enormous imbalance between profit growth and wage work, or between the fortunes of the stock market and those of average workers are only the more obvious signs that the "free" market economy still heavily favors capital over workers. Within the developing countries, labor movements are struggling to emerge in areas in which capital has penetrated. They battle for basic human rights in general and worker rights in particular. These rights can be achieved in one of two ways: through orderly global politics that enlist the power and authority of core nation-states, or through the road that takes decades of bloody conflict. Within parts of the capitalist core (e.g., the US), social arrangements won by working-class and poor people over the past century, reforms that helped humanize Western capitalism, are facing serious threats. Current trends – assaults by corporations against working people, threats of business migration, rollbacks of social programs, prominent racialized ideology, widening inequality, increasing xenophobia and hysteria over immigration, worries about inflation, shaky consumer and investor confidence, growth in global child, sweatshop, and slave labor practices, and the politics of fear associated with terrorism, climate change, and global pandemics – reflect a fragmentation and weakening of working class and democratic forces in the early 21st century. The forces of class exploitation, inequality, and suffering are as extensive and deep as ever. Post-industrial trends (hailed in core nations) have been harbingers of a harsher class reality veiled by a softer class ideology.

Taken together, these trends presage more, not less, class conflict in the years ahead. Due to the indeterminate quality of class conflict, we cannot know for certain what shape it will take in the future. But surely the greatest failure of insight and sociological imagination is to assume that there will be none.

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